

THE WHITE HOUSE

Office of the Press Secretary

For Immediate Release

January 24, 1985

REMARKS OF THE PRESIDENT
IN MEETING WITH
WESTERN HEMISPHERE LEGISLATORS

Room 450
The Old Executive Office Building

11:47 A.M. EST

THE PRESIDENT: I know that many of you come from somewhat warmer climates and aren't accustomed to this Washington deep freeze, but I'll hope that the warmth of our hospitality has helped make up for the temperature outside.

I think it's particularly fitting that your visit coincides with our Inaugural time, when the mantle of power here in the United States is passed to the choice of the electorate. Wherever we are, no matter what our political agenda, those who believe in democracy and human rights should rejoice in times like this. Believing in the peaceful transfer of power through democratic elections and a solid respect for human rights unites all of us here today with millions of people across the globe. Recognizing that bond is what this gathering and this Center for Democracy are all about.

I want to take this opportunity to thank the Democratic and Republican members of the United States Congress, Professor Allen Weinstein, Dr. John Gilber, Peter Kelly and Frank Fahrenkoph for all they've done to ensure the success of this conference.

Being from democratic countries, you know it's difficult to get opposing political parties together, even in worthwhile endeavors like this. Well, the bipartisan support behind this effort reflects the value we place on enhancing long-range hemispheric collaboration among the free and democratic countries of the Americas. Building and reinforcing these ties has been of the utmost importance to this administration and will continue to be so during the next four years.

Our efforts are guided by three consistent and mutually reinforcing goals. We seek to promote the development of democratic political institutions. We want to encourage economic growth, which will increase opportunity and improve the standard of living for people throughout the hemisphere. We're willing to help our friends defend themselves against Soviet Bloc, Cuban and Nicaraguan sponsored subversion.

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I like to think that the first of these goals is simply a reaffirmation of something in which our Forefathers believed so firmly, and that is that free and democratic government is the birthright of every citizen of this Hemisphere. The Americas should be, and by right of heritage, ought to be populated by free and independent people.

As you know, not long after our own war of independence, Simon Bolivar led the people of Latin America in a courageous struggle for independence. Bolivar, like Washington, a giant in the annals of human freedom, pointed out in his later years, "It is harder to maintain the balance of liberty than to endure the weight of tyranny."

The great liberator lamented that mankind is all too willing to rest unconcerned and accept things as they are. And that's why we, who are committed to free government and democratic institutions, must maintain a sense of fraternity between ourselves and other freedom-loving peoples.

Today, there are many reasons for optimism. Despite economic problems and the threat of well-armed, anti-democratic forces, we Americans -- and by that, I mean all of us, all Americans, from the north slope of Alaska to the tip of Tierra del Fuego -- are enjoying a rising tide of democracy.

Of the 34 countries in Latin America, 27, with about 90 percent of the region's population, are either democratic or in transition to democracy. A decade ago, less than 40 percent of Latin America's population was so fortunate.

I'd like to take this opportunity to offer my heartfelt best wishes to the representatives who are with us from the Hemisphere's newest democratic governments -- Uruguay and Brazil. And I'd like also to offer my congratulations to the people in political leadership of Argentina, who understand, I've -- I understand, have been chosen by the Center for the 1985 International Democracy Prize.

The trend to democracy not only underscores the desire of people to be free, but also suggests a new recognition that free government is the surest path to economic progress. This was pointed out long ago by Andres Bello, one of the Hemisphere's intellectual giants. "Liberty," he noted, "gives wings to the spirit of enterprise wherever it meets it."

Well, today, as never before, we need this spirit of enterprise to overcome the economic challenges of the Hemisphere. The leap in energy prices, the onset of global recession in 1979 and 1980 brought serious hardship throughout the world.

Here in the United States, we countered the economic downturn with economic reforms that lowered tax rates, eliminated counterproductive government regulations, and brought down the rate of increase in government spending. We concentrated on promoting growth and opportunity, on encouraging business enterprise and investment. And this formula worked well for us.

Last year, we had a growth rate of 6.8 percent. And that was the best performance in the Hemisphere.

And the inflation rate was only 4 percent. In fact, it has only averaged 3.9 percent over the last three years.

While putting our own economic house in order, we've tried to help our hemispheric neighbors and friends. We increased by over 50 percent the level of bilateral economic assistance over the previous administration. We've continued to support the World Bank, the Inter-American Bank and the IMF programs. We've worked with leaders in government and the private sector to encourage the refinancing of international debt. Your cooperation has been indispensable in this effort.

And last year a dramatic and innovative approach to progress in Central America and the Caribbean went into effect. It took considerable effort to pass the Caribbean Basin Initiative, and we're anxious to work with you to see that its benefits are enjoyed by all concerned.

A few moments ago, I expressed optimism about the course of political developments in the Americas. I'd like to add that I'm equally optimistic that our economic problems, which today seem so menacing, will be overcome. Free people, given time, will find a way to solve what may appear to be unsolvable. I can assure you, the people of the United States are anxious to work with your people to build a prosperous and opportunity-filled future.

Our cooperation will enhance our chance for economic progress and help us meet some serious challenges to our security as well.

The transition to democracy, especially in Central America, has been accompanied by a concerted and well-financed effort by the Soviet Bloc and Cuba to undermine democratic institutions and to seize power from those who believe in democracy. This is nothing new. Venezuelans who struggled so long and hard for freedom faced this same threat as they transformed their country into a democracy. Similar subversion -- financed, armed and supported by the outside -- has plagued Colombia and other countries as well.

A new danger we see in Central America is the support being given the Sandinistas by Colonel Qaddafi's Libya, the PLO, and most recently, the Ayatollah Khomeini's Iran.

The subversion we're talking about violates international law; the Organization of American States, in the past, has enacted sanctions against Cuba for such aggression. The Sandinistas have been attacking their neighbors through armed subversion since August of 1979. Countering this by supporting Nicaraguan freedom fighters is essentially acting in self-defense and is certainly consistent with the United Nations and OAS Charter provisions for individual and collective security.

Two centuries ago, when our forefathers in the United States were risking all to establish our democracy, one of our Founding Fathers said,

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"We must all hang together or assuredly, we shall all hang separately."

Well, I think it behooves all of us who believe in democratic government, in free elections, in the respect for human rights to stand side by side with those who share our ideals, especially in Central America. We must not permit those heavily armed by a far-away dictatorship to undermine their neighbors and to stamp out democratic alternatives at home. We must have the same solidarity with those who struggle for democracy, as our adversaries do, with those who would impose communist dictatorship.

It was just one year ago when the Bipartisan Commission on Central America, of which John Silber was a member, issued their report. These distinguished citizens concluded that there is indeed a threat to Central America. As they recommended, I have asked the United States Congress to provide \$8 billion in aid over the next five years for economic and social help. We're also taking steps, including active diplomacy, to defuse a potential crisis. We support, for example, all 21 objectives of the Contadora Process, including the implementation of the democratic commitments made by the Sandinistas to the Organization of American States in 1979.

I believe that the answer lies in democracy. There's never been a war between two free countries. If we're for democracy, we're for peace, domestically and internationally. Today, with democracy on the rise, we have it within our power to recapture Simon Bolivar's dream. We can have a united hemisphere, living in peace, opportunity and freedom.

The ideals we share have come of age and now is the time. We are the people. Democracy is the way. There are some 600 million of us from that tip of Tierra del Fuego up to that north coast of Alaska, bound together by a common heritage and history, all of us Americans, all of us worshiping the same God. What a power for good in the world we can be, if we strengthen our neighborliness and the contact and the cooperation between us.

Thank you for being here, and God bless you all.
(Applause.)

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11:59 A.M. EST